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What strategies did you use to tackle the spillover effects of the pandemic?

Well, it came to us sooner than we expected. But the consensus between the President and the Cabinet led to a decision of continuation of all major public investment programmes such as infrastructure developments which were in progress at that time. We knew that if we bring the engine of the country to halt, our people would end up starving. Simply, we kept the engine running, but at an idle speed. That was the first step we took. Out of around 160 island resorts of the country, the Government took over a few and turned them into isolation and quarantine facilities. Four months down the line, we were confident enough that we could open the

borders for tourists. The Maldives became the first country to open its borders to foreign travelers while safety rules were still stringent to the level required.

What steps have you taken to improve the port infrastructure of the country?

We have one single port of entry to the country, which is the Malé port. Due to the insufficiency of this port to cater to the growing needs of the country, reclamation in the eastern part of Gulhifalhu lagoon was initiated with the aim of expanding the port infrastructure. The key for the success of this port heavily relies on the connectivity to the capital Malé. Sixty seven kms of bridges and roads will connect Malé, Gulhifalhu, Villingili, and Thilafushi, making up the greater

Malé area. This will make many industrial processes efficient including port functions.

What are the ongoing and forthcoming projects to improve connectivity between the islands?

Well, the Government believes that the biggest obstacle for the socioeconomic development of the Maldives is the isolated nature of these islands. Development is closely related to connectivity. Over the years, successive governments have been developing the air transport infrastructure across the archipelago and we now have around 17 domestic airports and 3 international airports in operation. Nevertheless, air transport is not something which people would commute on a daily basis. After scrutiny,

we found out that establishing a ferry network was the ideal option. To do this, we came up with a special plan where we divided the archipelago into three regions and each region into two zones. Within each zone, we grouped the islands into clusters. This led the foundation to design a transport network within the nation.

What actions have you taken to address the housing shortage?

The country is going through a worsening housing shortage at present. Over the past 4 to 5 decades, centralisation has been a key issue where almost all of the services were only available in the capital Malé. This led everyone's attention to Malé and growing income levels of the citizens over the past few decades created the



ability to migrate and settle in Malé. These factors have created an increase in demand for housing in Malé and that demand is more than the capacity which Malé could potentially provide. The development of Hulhumale was one major step as a solution to this issue.

How do current regulations address these issues?

Eighty per cent of the total property available in the Maldives are considered to be Government property. One of the major underlying issues is that around 40% of the total tenants of these properties have defaulted in their payments to the Govern-

ment. The issue is that even if the regulation states that you could evict the residents, it is not practical and at the same time ethical for a government to act in that manner. This is why I see that the Government shouldn't be holding such a large portion of property.

What are the recent trends in the housing market of Maldives?

The trend is the growing demand for housing. Recently we announced 4,000 housing units and we had 20,000 applicants. In 2018, when the previous government announced 7,000 housing units, they even had 20,000 applicants. So what is visible is that

even after 4 years, the demand for housing has not gone down and still remains the same. The data from the census shows that the population of Malé by 2025 will surpass the total population of all the other islands of the Maldives. At present, the population of Malé accounts for over 40% of the entire population of the nation.

Do you expect any changes in the housing market during the next five years?

If we can bring the connectivity, if we can make the other remaining islands attractive enough for people to live in, if we could truly decentralise the country,

migration towards Malé would slow down. One of the major targets of the present Government is to provide water and sanitation services to all the inhabited islands by the end of the Government's tenure.

What benefits will the country gain from the Hulhumale second phase?

The largest benefit the country could gain from the Hulhumale second phase is that it would slightly ease the housing supply shortage which currently exists in the country.

